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NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVISTS DESERVE FAIR TREATMENT ON HEALTH BENEFITS, U.S. REP. COOPER SAYS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Nashville Congressman Jim Cooper today said it's time for the government to recognize the sacrifices and commitment shown by National Guard members and Reservists and guarantee them fair access to health benefits.

Cooper is calling on Congress to pass the National Guard and Reserve Comprehensive Health Benefit Act of 2003. The legislation would offer National Guard and Reserve members and their families the opportunity to participate in the TRICARE program which is available to active duty service members and their families. Currently, National Guard and Reserve members are eligible for the TRICARE health benefits program only after they have been activated for more than 30 days.

"The nation continues to rely on our reserve military troops to support operations around the world," Cooper said. "Tennessee alone has more than 2,100 reserve troops mobilized as of today. One way to keep good people in the reserves is to give them fair access to quality healthcare, and this legislation helps achieve that goal.

"Far too many of our brave National Guard and Reserve service members have inadequate healthcare insurance or no coverage at all," Cooper added. "We count on them to protect our freedom and our country. The nation has to do better by these brave Americans."

The bill guarantees that members of the National Guard and Reserve are eligible to enroll for health care coverage under TRICARE. While the benefits would be the same as those available to active duty troops, eligible members would be required to pay a premium similar to the cost share split between the government and federal employees under the Federal Employees' Health Benefits Program.

A study conducted by the General Accounting Office (GAO) at the request of Congress found that more than 21% of reservists do not have health insurance. Most are without health insurance because their work does not offer it or they are self-employed and simply cannot afford it.

The bill would offer Reservists, National Guard members and their families the opportunity to participate in TRICARE, or permit the service members to take advantage of a partial subsidy of private health insurance premiums for those who choose to retain their private health insurance instead of converting to TRICARE. The bill would also improve transition coverage upon deactivation.

TRICARE is the U.S. military's medical insurance program.

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